

September 27th, 2020

Sermon Title: Guidelines for the Mission

Sermon Text: Acts 12:1-17, James 1-5 (selected verses)

Sermon Summary

This message begins with a fascinating story from the book of Acts concerning the New Testament Church. The story highlights the need for guidelines for the newly formed church and its God-given mission. The message concludes with a look at some guidelines for the Church's mission which are found in the Book of James. The guidelines not only apply to the larger church but are very applicable to the individual lives of church members. The guidelines are broken down into do's and don'ts. There are five of each! James used a style of writing known as "paranetic literature." "Paranesis is general ethical instruction and exhortation...These instructions are general and calculated to inspire Christian's conduct in a wide variety of circumstances. It was characteristic of paranesis to place together in loose organization a series of exhortations without any concern to develop one theme or line of thought in the entire writing." (Broadman Commentary) This style is the reason the passages selected in James are not in sequential order.

Full Sermon Notes

"And the Church of Christ was born, Then the Spirit lit the flame. Now this gospel truth of old shall not kneel, shall not faint!" Thank You Jesus for all that You have done to make a way for us to be a part of the Church, Your Church, The Body of Christ and thanks for allowing us to be a part of Your mission to seek and to save that which is lost! Amen? Amen! Let's pray and ask God to teach us about that mission today! Prayer.

We're going to start today with a story! An amazing story that showcases the need for the newly formed church to have some guidelines for their worldwide mission. Remember Jesus had said...

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Holy Spirit would be the power behind the mission of the followers of Jesus, but that did not mean there would be no opposition to the mission or that they would not need instructions and guidelines for their mission. There would be difficulties! There would be challenges! There would be obstacles to overcome, and there would certainly be the need for guidelines! Let's check in on the New Testament Church and see how things were going...

Acts 12:1 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

Acts 12:2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

Acts 12:3 When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

Acts 12:4 After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

16 soldiers to guard one guy! I think Herod was scared of something besides Peter. He knew there was something different about Peter and that there were supernatural things associated with the followers of Jesus Christ.

Acts 12:5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Acts 12:6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

Acts 12:7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

Acts 12:8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so.

"Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him.

Acts 12:9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.

Acts 12:10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Acts 12:11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

Acts 12:12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.

Acts 12:13 Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door.

Several translations say a servant girl, which would indicate that she was young. This may account for her actions and for the response she got from the others. Listen and you'll see what I'm talking about...

Acts 12:14 When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

Acts 12:15 "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

Hey kids, have you ever tried to convince adults that you really did see something, but they didn't believe you? That's probably how Rhoda felt. "Gee, they never believe anything I say!" Now if you've told things that weren't true before, they may not believe you when you tell the truth, because they don't trust you. So make sure you always tell the truth. Back to our story...

Acts 12:16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

He really was out of prison and at the door. But let's go back for just a moment. The persecution of Christians had gotten really bad! James the brother of John had been put to death with a sword and Peter had been put in prison. Things weren't looking good for the mission. So what should a follower of Jesus do when things get really tough? What were the followers of Jesus doing at the house of Mary the mother of John? Praying! That's right! But here's what happens many times when we pray, we don't really expect God to hear us or answer us. Here they were praying for Peter to get out of prison and yet they didn't really believe it was possible! This young girl Rhoda tells them Peter is at the door and they tell her she's lost her mind, and someone even says it must be his angel. Wow, his angel? Did they think he had already been put to death? And they go back to praying. I can hear them: "Lord please get Peter out of prison. Please deliver him from the hand of that wicked King Herod!" Then Rhoda says, "Excuse me please, Peter's at the door!" They say: "You've lost your mind, it must be his angel!" But somebody hears the persistent knocking on the door and answers! They are astonished to see Peter!

Acts 12:17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

Who was this James they are to tell? James the brother of Jesus. This is the James who would go on to write the book of James. And what was the purpose of his book? I believe it was to give guidelines to the New Testament Church so they could successfully carry out their God-given mission! Harold S. Songer put it this way in the Broadman Commentary on James...

"For James the ethical implications of following Jesus extend to every aspect of the Christian life...For James, being a member of a Christian community meant living in a dedicated struggle against sin, immorality, and injustice. Many of the Christians to whom James wrote had made some progress in Christian life; but they were not struggling enough with the larger implications of faith in Christ such as endurance in trials, consistency in Christian perspective, overcoming prejudice, economic responsibility, and planning one's life in reliance upon God. With magnificent insight, James summons Christians to consider the meaning of their profession of faith in Christ in terms that include one's personal life and (their) responsible involvement with others in society."

Folks, if we are to continue the mission of Jesus to seek and to save that which is lost and to make disciples of them, we must not just believe the principles Jesus taught, we must live them! People are watching the church, which is the followers of Jesus, to see how we live our lives and what our values are! If you're going to be on a mission team and go on a mission trip, how important do you think it would be for your personal life to reflect the values of the church or organization sending you on that mission? How would it affect the effectiveness of the mission if the team members lived by a totally different set of values or guidelines?

With that in mind I want us to look at some guidelines for our mission, which we find in the Book of James, a letter written to the New Testament Church which had been dispersed among the nations! The dictionary definition of the word guideline is this...

Guideline - a general rule, principle, or piece of advice.

So guidelines, plural would be multiple rules, principles or pieces of advice. Today we're going to look at multiple guidelines we find in the book of James and they will fall under two categories:

The Do's and the Don'ts of the mission!

Now When you read the very first words of James' letter to the church they seem to be a response to what had happened in our story we just read about Peter and the people praying for him. Check this out...James says...

James 1:2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, James 1:3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

James 1:4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

James 1:6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

James 1:7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

James 1:8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

So James certainly knew about the persecution of the church. He knew about Peter's imprisonment and miraculous escape. He had been told about them praying for Peter and yet not expecting God to hear their prayers. So that makes the verses we just read, even more powerful in regards to the mission of the church! So let's look at some of the guidelines which should draw lines morally, ethically and spiritually to guide us on our mission. And by the way, two things: These guidelines will not only help you with the mission of the church, but they will have extreme practical application to your personal lives. Secondly, if they seem to be in a random order or somewhat disconnected from each other, this was a form of writing which James used called "paranetic literature." According to the Broadman Commentary...

"Paranesis is general ethical instruction and exhortation...These instructions are general and calculated to inspire Christian's conduct in a wide variety of circumstances. It was characteristic of paranesis to place together in loose organization a series of exhortations without any concern to develop one theme or line of thought in the entire writing."

It was almost as if a writer using this form was thinking "I'm going to throw a lot of good things out there to these folks and let them pick the thing that they need, that fits their situation and present circumstances! Sometimes that's very effective and everyone goes home with just what they needed! So I'm going to do a little parenthesis today, with one exception: I am going to develop one theme..."

Guidelines for the Mission of the Church!

But there may be a particular point that hits home in your personal life apart from your mission as a part of the Body of Christ, and that's okay and even a desired outcome of today's message.

So let's look at our guidelines by looking at the Do's and the Don'ts of the Mission!

So let's look at the...

Guidelines - The Do's and Don'ts of the Mission

1. Do Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials!

Notice James didn't say if you face trials, but when! Being on mission for Jesus will bring trials in our lives. Satan's not going to go down without a fight! Why would James say to consider it pure joy when we face trials? Because when we face trials and tribulations God's gonna step in on our behalf and that's always amazing to watch and see! And the testing of our faith produces perseverance, and that's something we all need! Paul said this in...

1 Thessalonians 5:18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

He didn't say "give thanks 'for' all circumstances but 'in' all circumstances! Why? Because God will come through! He fights for us!

2. Don't give up, let perseverance finish its work!

James 1:4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

When we persevere we mature! It's a process. Being on mission with Jesus is a lifelong process! Discipleship is a process! We grow, we mature, we become more like Jesus with each and every trial we overcome by His power and grace! And it's because of that power and grace that we lack nothing when it comes to provisions for the mission. God will give us what we need. James says this...

James 1:12 Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

This could be stated, “will be crowned with life!” This could be talking about eternal life, but could also be talking about our lives here on earth! One of the greatest crowns we could ever have here in this world is to allow God to crown us with His purpose in life! And when it comes to the purpose of God’s mission we need God’s wisdom!

3. Do Ask God for wisdom!

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

I love the “without finding fault” part! God doesn’t belittle us because we don’t know! He doesn’t start telling us how we would already know if we had been listening or hadn’t done this or that! Nope, He is glad we finally admit we need Him and His wisdom and He gladly gives us more wisdom than we asked for! He knows we need His perspective, His “higher than us”, “God perspective” if we are to live lives that will make a difference in this old world! I don’t know about you, but I try to ask God for wisdom every single day of my life! There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t need His wisdom and guidance!

4. Don’t doubt that God will answer your prayer for wisdom!

James 1:6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

We must trust God to answer our prayers and trust God’s answer to be the right answer! So like last week, we once again must remember that God is not a magic genie in a bottle who we can force to do our bidding. When we pray we must desire His will be done. This is mission critical.

I love the way the writer of Proverbs put it...

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

Proverbs 3:6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

5. Do Walk in humility!

James 1:9 Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.

James 1:10 But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower.

When it comes to knowing Jesus and being on mission for Jesus, it doesn't matter what you bring to the table. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. Rich and poor alike stand in need of God's grace! The poor man is rich because He is a child of God and the rich man is only rich if he is a child of God! Poor and rich alike can get caught up in pride and when that happens in the church, the mission of the church is devastated along with those caught up in such things. James says...

James 3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

James also points out that...

James 4:6 ... "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."
James then warns us...

6. Don't give in to selfish desires!

James 3:14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

James 3:15 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

James 3:16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

He goes on to say...

James 4:1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

James 4:2 You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.

James 4:3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Giving in to selfish desires will simply destroy our ability to complete our mission!

7. Do exercise the wisdom God gives you!

James 3:17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Hey kids, you'll find some of the answers for your do's list in the answer to this question: Does our mission to seek and to save that which is lost and to make disciples of those

people need for us to be peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere? Absolutely! Peace loving, not fighting and quarreling! Considerate, nice, and kind, and caring! Submissive! That means being obedient to God and allowing Him to be our boss, our guide, our director in life! God's wisdom leads us to be full of mercy, willing to forgive others, impartial and sincere. And what happens when we do these things?

James 3:18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

We will reap a harvest! Our mission of reaching the lost and making disciples of them will result in a harvest of righteousness! In other words, the harvest of us living righteous lives will be the reaching of lost people through the testimony of our words and our deeds! In fact James tells us...

8. Don't just listen to the word, live the word!

James 1:19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

James 1:20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

James 1:21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

James 1:22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

James 1:23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror

James 1:24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

James 1:25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

Boy these verses have a bunch of do's and don'ts! Do be quick to listen, but slow to speak. Don't be quickly angered! Get rid of all moral filth! Look intently into God's Word! By the way, looking intently into the perfect law that gives freedom is not talking about working for salvation, but living in such a way that God can bless you! Living the principles of God, not just listening to them.

9. Do practice pure religion!

What is pure religion? I'm so glad you asked! James tells us...

James 1:26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

James 1:27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Pure religion is based on a personal relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Son and it affects what we say and what we do! So let me just say a quick word about what we say! James says we should keep a tight rein on our tongues. I'm afraid we're not always good at this and that can be extremely detrimental to our mission. James would later say...

James 3:3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

James 3:4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

James 3:5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

James 3:6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

People just don't realize many times the damage they can do to other people by the mean things they say, and if they do realize the damage they're doing then shame on them! That's a sign of impure religion by doing what we shouldn't be doing.

James clarifies even more what pure religion is when he talks about some of the things we should be doing, looking after orphans and widows in their distress and keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world. James then gives an example of something we shouldn't do...

James 2:1 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

James 2:2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.

James 2:3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet,"

James 2:4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

10. Don't claim to have great faith if that faith has no influence on the actions of your life!

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

James 2:15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.

James 2:16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

James 2:17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Folks this is not salvation by works, it's just plain mathematics! If you claim to have saving faith in Jesus and yet there is absolutely no change in your life, no difference between you and the world, then do the math. Something's not adding up! Here's what was happening. Some Jews tried to use their good works to say that faith didn't matter and some Christians tried to use their claims of great faith to say that their actions and deeds didn't matter! Both are so wrong! We are saved by grace, but when we are truly transformed by Jesus, a changed life will follow. That doesn't mean you're perfect and never mess up, but it does mean that things have changed and are not the same.

So what is the secret to following the guidelines for the mission? Seems like a lot of do's and don'ts. How are we supposed to keep up with all of those things? Well James has an app for that!

James 4:7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

James 4:8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

How do we submit to God, resist the devil, come near to God, wash our unclean hands and purify our double-minded hearts? James tells us...

James 4:10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

If you've never accepted Jesus as your Savior then do these three things:

Admit you're a sinner in need of a Savior, believe Jesus died to be that Savior and call upon the name of the Lord! Invite Him into your life!

And if you've accepted Jesus as your Savior in the past, but haven't been living for the Lord in the present, ask Him to forgive you and then humble yourself to allow Jesus to be the Lord of your life! Lord of your actions, your words, your attitudes, your priorities, your goals, your purpose and your mission in life! I can promise you that you will not regret these decisions! Let's pray!

